



# Lewis and Clark in North Dakota: Wildlife Then & Now

## A BRIEF NATURAL HISTORY OF NORTH DAKOTA

### 1804 to Present

By Bill Jensen

President Jefferson held the titles of farmer and scientist as dear, or dearer, than that of statesman. It is not surprising that Jefferson's directives to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on exploring went beyond evaluating trade routes across this vast wilderness of the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase. The Corps of Discovery was asked to study mineralogy, climate, geography, botany, zoology, ethnology of all Indian tribes encountered and to provide a detailed report upon their return. Expedition journals have provided us with a priceless view of this country prior to European settlement.

Lewis and Clark described no fewer than 122 new species and subspecies of animals, and 178 new species of plants during their expedition. Three things should be remembered, relative to the time spent in North Dakota: (1) Most travel was confined to the narrow corridor along the Missouri River;

(2) the majority of their stay was during the winter months of 1804 and 1805 at Fort Mandan; and (3) game was relatively scarce in the vicinity of Fort Mandan due to the neighboring Knife River Indian villages with a permanent population of between 4,000 and 5,000 people. (Note: In 1804 the population of St. Louis was only about 3,000.)

I have attempted to provide a more complete picture of the changes that have occurred over the past 200 years by drawing upon a variety of sources. Italicized names and spellings are those used by Lewis and Clark in their journals. Maps showing population ranges and plant communities are intended as rough estimates. The *Prairie Naturalist*, a professional journal dedicated to the natural history of the Great Plains, is an excellent source for articles on specific species and issues.